

"The Secret of Life"

An article written by Denny Olson

I must be a contrary person. Whenever faced with the obvious, I manage to do an about face in my brain and consider the view in the new direction. It's spring. Things are lush and green, growth is riotous, the promise of leisurely days in the sun lulls the wariest of animals into relative indolence. It was on just such a day that I stumbled onto the secret of life. Literally...

...I ended up on my face. Lucky for me, it was a soft landing. My nose was buried in a mound of rich-smelling fern moss (it looks like tiny fern fronds), and beneath the wood-what remained of an ancient red pine. If I hadn't been a few centimeters away, I wouldn't have noticed. The rancid wood was more alive than it had been when it was...alive. Webs of fungus rootlets enmeshed the remaining wood patterns in a multi-dimensional tapestry. Sowbugs, centipedes and beetles scurried for cover, their universe blown apart by a bumbling giant. Mites, beautiful shades of scarlet and rust, were frozen in shock. Kelly green fungus stained the wood at older cracks than the ones I had made. There was an entire city here, with crowded streets and tenements. I could almost hear the horns honking.

I was looking, of course, at death. This tree was far past "decadent," as the silviculturists say in their objective terminology. Useless. A waste. One former world leader called these rotting logs "pollution." But face-down in the evidence, I felt my viewpoint doing another "one-eighty." The "secret of life" – is death.

The extent to which this is true surprised even me. Twenty thousand animals live in the average dead log. One-third of all forest species call decadent trees home. Woodpeckers nest in these old trees, and eat bark beetles, which would kill live trees if not kept in check. Later, owls use the woodpecker home, and check and balance the rodent population (some of which girdle new trees). Rotting logs also house chipmunks, who carry fungal spores on their hair from tree-root to tree-root. These spores grow into fungi which are symbiotic with roots of evergreen trees-they cannot gather nutrients without each other. And where does soil, to grow new trees, come from? Death, that's where.

There would be no live trees without the contributions of dead ones. It didn't take much of a logic extension to realize that there would be no live anything without the death of everything before.

We eat, wear, sleep on, and drive around in death every day.

It is virtually impossible to untangle and isolate death from life, and that is precisely why the world works so well. Not that we don't try. To us, death is a tribal loss and not a global gain. And behind it all is fear. Oil of Olay. Grecian Formula. Eat, drink and be merry. Grab all the gusto you can...

We run and run, pushing the great reality behind us. But it is always just behind, in the philosophical company of taxes. Life exists only at the edge of death, but we can't see the forest for the decadent trees.

Maybe the fault lies with our senses. We can see, hear, feel, smell only things, and our reality gets trapped in the obvious. But the world is also filled with processes and relationships, and those are only seen in abstraction, or with the heart. At a higher level, the universe is seamless, and the boundaries around things are only our arbitrary and feeble attempts to "control" the world in our minds. A flea can attempt to steer the dog, but only succeeds in making him itch a little.

Native Americans, who historically were relatively free from the need to accumulate "things," were gifted with a maturity about death which is still foreign to most of us. To them, it really was better to give than receive, even of themselves. "Someday I will cover myself with earth, so that I may see, before I die, how sweet is the season of my time," they would say. Today, we lock our bodies in concrete vaults, perhaps the ultimate statement of our own special kind of ignorance. From predator control to Smokey Bear, we can't seem to accept that death fuels life, a yin and yang relationship, which models all relationships. Always, in the middle of life is much death, and in the middle of death is humming, vibrating life.

How will I face my own demise someday? I don't know, exactly. But I don't change the subject anymore. You see, I was out in the woods one summer and fell onto this log...